

Motivation and Attitudes toward Learning English among Thai Students

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Abstract

The study investigates the motivation and attitudes of Thai students toward learning English, focusing on the factors that influence their engagement, persistence, and achievement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). As English has become an essential tool for global communication, education, and career opportunities, understanding learners' motivational orientations and attitudes is crucial for improving English language education in Thailand. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews administered to secondary and university-level students. The findings reveal that most students exhibit instrumental motivation, viewing English primarily as a means to academic and professional success, while integrative motivation, such as interest in culture and communication with native speakers, plays a supportive but less dominant role. Attitudes toward English learning were generally positive, though challenges such as limited confidence, fear of making mistakes, and insufficient exposure to authentic language use hinder progress. The study highlights the importance of fostering both instrumental and integrative motivations, while creating supportive learning environments that build confidence and promote active use of English. Recommendations include integrating communicative activities, providing authentic exposure, and addressing affective factors to enhance students' motivation and attitudes toward English learning.

Keywords: Motivation; attitudes; integrating communicative activities

Introduction

English has become the dominant global language in education, business, science, technology, and international communication. It serves as a lingua franca that enables individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to interact effectively (Richards, 2015). In the context of Thailand, the learning of English has long been a national priority, given its role in regional integration under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and in global economic competitiveness. Despite numerous reforms and investments in English education, Thai students' overall English proficiency remains lower than many of their Southeast Asian peers, as reflected in rankings such as the EF English Proficiency Index (Education First, 2023). This persistent gap raises important questions about the underlying factors that influence students' language learning processes, among which motivation and attitudes are considered central.

Background of the Study

Motivation has consistently been identified as one of the most critical factors in second language acquisition (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). It drives learners to initiate and sustain their efforts, influencing the strategies they employ and the outcomes they achieve. Attitudes toward the target language, its speakers, and the learning process itself are closely linked to motivation and may either facilitate or hinder progress (Gardner, 2010). In Thailand, where English is taught as a foreign language rather than a second language, students often encounter limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. This limited exposure heightens the significance of internal factors such as motivation and attitudes in determining success.

Previous research has shown that Thai students tend to display stronger **instrumental motivation**—that is, learning English for practical benefits such as passing examinations, gaining employment, or pursuing higher education—than **integrative motivation**, which reflects a desire to integrate with the culture of English-speaking communities (Khamkhien, 2010). While instrumental motivation can lead to short-term achievement, integrative motivation is often associated with long-term proficiency and sustained learning. However, Thai students' attitudes toward English learning are shaped by multiple factors, including traditional teacher-centered instruction, cultural perceptions, and anxiety about

speaking and making mistakes (Wongsothorn et al., 2018). Such issues often result in low confidence and limited communicative competence, despite years of study.

Problem Statement

Although English is emphasized in Thailand's national curriculum and required for academic and professional advancement, the outcomes remain unsatisfactory. Many Thai students complete secondary or even tertiary education with limited ability to communicate effectively in English (Noom-ura, 2013). Standardized test results often highlight weaknesses in listening and speaking, suggesting that motivational and attitudinal factors may be contributing to these persistent challenges. While there is a growing body of research on English language teaching in Thailand, there remains a need to specifically explore how motivation and attitudes influence students' learning experiences and outcomes across different educational levels. By examining these psychological and affective dimensions, educators and policymakers can better understand why reforms have not translated into improved proficiency and what interventions may be effective.

Significance of Study

Understanding Thai students' motivation and attitudes toward learning English carries both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the broader field of second language acquisition by examining how well-established motivational frameworks, such as Gardner's socio-educational model and Dörnyei's L2 motivational self system, apply in the Thai context. Practically, the findings can inform instructional design, curriculum development, and teacher training in Thailand. For instance, if students are found to be predominantly instrumentally motivated, then curricular reforms may need to place greater emphasis on fostering integrative motivation and communicative competence. Similarly, insights into students' attitudes—whether positive or negative—can guide teachers in creating supportive, engaging, and culturally relevant classroom environments that build confidence and reduce anxiety.

Research Objectives

The present study aims to investigate the following:

1. To examine the types of motivation (instrumental and integrative) that influence Thai students' English language learning.
2. To explore students' attitudes toward English as a language, English-speaking cultures, and the English learning process.
3. To identify challenges and affective factors, such as anxiety and confidence, that may hinder motivation and positive attitudes.
4. To provide recommendations for fostering stronger motivation and more favorable attitudes toward English learning among Thai students.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on Thai students at the secondary and tertiary levels, as these groups represent critical stages in the development of English proficiency for academic and professional purposes. While the findings may not be generalized to all learners across the country, they provide valuable insights into the motivational orientations and attitudinal patterns of Thai learners in formal educational settings. The study does not attempt to measure language proficiency directly but rather explores psychological and affective dimensions that influence learning.

Organization of the Study

This paper is structured as follows. After the introduction, a review of related literature provides an overview of theoretical frameworks on motivation and attitudes in second language learning, with particular emphasis on research conducted in Thailand and Southeast Asia. The methodology section outlines the participants, instruments, and procedures used to collect and analyze data. The results and discussion sections present the findings, highlighting both instrumental and integrative aspects of motivation, as well as positive and negative attitudes identified among Thai students. Finally, the conclusion offers implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Theoretical Framework

Motivation and Attitudes toward Learning English among Thai Students

Motivation and attitudes are widely acknowledged as central factors influencing the process of second and foreign language acquisition (Gardner, 2010; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). In the Thai context, where English is taught as a foreign language, these affective variables become even more significant due to the limited opportunities for authentic language use outside the classroom (Khamkhien, 2010). This section presents the key theoretical foundations that

underpin the study: **Gardner's socio-educational model, instrumental and integrative motivation, Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, and the role of attitudes in language learning.**

1. Gardner's Socio-Educational Model

One of the most influential theories in second language acquisition is Gardner's socio-educational model (Gardner, 2010). This framework emphasizes that motivation to learn a language is not only a matter of individual psychology but also shaped by social and cultural contexts. Gardner identifies three essential components of motivation:

1. **Desire to learn the language,**
2. **Effort invested in learning, and**
3. **Positive attitudes toward the language and its speakers.**

The model distinguishes between **integrative motivation**, which reflects learners' interest in integrating with the culture of the target language community, and **instrumental motivation**, which relates to practical benefits such as academic achievement, employment, or economic advancement. In Thailand, research suggests that students are more strongly influenced by instrumental factors, although integrative elements play a supportive role (Wongsothorn et al., 2018).

2. Instrumental and Integrative Motivation

The distinction between instrumental and integrative motivation remains central to discussions on language learning.

- **Instrumental motivation** is utilitarian, focusing on the tangible advantages of learning English, such as securing better job opportunities, passing entrance examinations, or gaining access to higher education (Noom-ura, 2013).
- **Integrative motivation**, on the other hand, arises from learners' positive attitudes toward English-speaking cultures and a desire to interact with or become part of those communities (Gardner, 2010).

Thai students, like many Asian learners, often report higher instrumental than integrative motivation due to the educational system's exam-oriented nature and societal emphasis on English as a skill for socioeconomic mobility (Khamkhien, 2010). Nevertheless, integrative motivation, even when less dominant, is linked to more sustained engagement and higher long-term proficiency.

3. Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System

While Gardner's model provides a strong foundation, it has been critiqued for its limited applicability in foreign language contexts where contact with native speakers is rare (Lamb, 2012). To address this, Dörnyei (2009) proposed the **L2 Motivational Self System**, which emphasizes learners' self-concept and future identity. The system consists of three components:

1. **Ideal L2 Self** – the vision of oneself as a proficient English user in the future.
2. **Ought-to L2 Self** – the sense of obligation or external pressure to learn English, such as parental expectations, societal demands, or career requirements.
3. **L2 Learning Experience** – attitudes toward the immediate learning environment, including teachers, peers, and classroom activities.

In Thailand, the *ideal L2 self* often reflects aspirations for international careers, study abroad, or participation in ASEAN and global communities. Meanwhile, the *ought-to self* is strongly influenced by parents, teachers, and the national curriculum that stresses the importance of English. Studies show that students who possess a clear and vivid *ideal L2 self* are more likely to persist in their learning and achieve higher proficiency (Taguchi et al., 2009).

4. The Role of Attitudes in Language Learning

Attitudes toward English and its learning context are closely tied to motivation. Positive attitudes can increase learners' willingness to engage, while negative attitudes may result in anxiety, avoidance, or lack of persistence (Ellis, 2015). In Thailand, many students express positive attitudes toward English as an international language and recognize its importance for future success (Wongsothorn et al., 2018). However, they often hold negative attitudes toward traditional classroom practices that emphasize rote memorization, grammar translation, and teacher-centered instruction (Noom-ura, 2013). Additionally, language anxiety, particularly fear of making mistakes in speaking, has been identified as a barrier to developing communicative competence (Trang et al., 2013).

The interplay of attitudes and motivation thus directly affects outcomes. A student may recognize the instrumental value of English but, if they feel anxious, lack confidence, or dislike classroom practices, their motivation

may weaken. Conversely, supportive teachers, engaging activities, and opportunities for authentic use of English can foster positive attitudes that sustain motivation.

5. Application to the Thai Context

The theoretical perspectives outlined above provide a lens for understanding Thai students' English learning. Gardner's distinction between instrumental and integrative motivation helps explain why Thai students prioritize exams and career-related goals, while Dörnyei's model clarifies the importance of self-concept and identity in shaping long-term engagement. Attitudinal factors further explain the mixed outcomes observed in Thai classrooms: students value English but often feel anxious or unmotivated in rigid, exam-driven contexts.

By integrating these theories, the study acknowledges that Thai students' motivation and attitudes are shaped by both external demands (e.g., national policies, examinations, parental expectations) and internal visions of themselves as English users. Effective teaching in Thailand, therefore, requires not only developing language skills but also fostering positive attitudes, supporting learners' ideal L2 selves, and reducing anxiety in the classroom.

Knowledge from Research

Research on motivation and attitudes toward learning English among Thai students provides valuable insights into the psychological and social factors that shape language learning outcomes. The knowledge gained from previous studies highlights several recurring themes that can guide both theory and practice in English language education.

1. The Dominance of Instrumental Motivation

One consistent finding is that Thai students are primarily driven by **instrumental motivation**, focusing on practical benefits such as passing entrance examinations, securing employment, or gaining academic advancement (Khamkhien, 2010; Noom-ura, 2013). This reflects the exam-oriented nature of Thailand's education system and the widespread perception of English as a tool for socioeconomic mobility. While instrumental goals can foster short-term achievement, they may not always lead to sustained engagement or communicative competence, particularly if learning is seen merely as a requirement rather than a meaningful skill.

2. Limited but Important Role of Integrative Motivation

Although less dominant, **integrative motivation**—interest in the language, culture, and interaction with speakers of English—plays an important supportive role in Thai learners' success (Gardner, 2010; Wongsothorn et al., 2018). Students who develop a positive image of themselves as future English users, or who connect learning English with cultural curiosity and personal identity, are more likely to persist and achieve higher proficiency. This aligns with Dörnyei's concept of the **Ideal L2 Self**, which emphasizes how learners' vision of themselves as competent English speakers can sustain motivation over time (Dörnyei, 2009).

3. Attitudes as a Double-Edged Factor

Attitudes toward English and its learning context strongly influence motivation. Studies show that Thai students generally hold **positive attitudes toward English** as an international language and recognize its importance for future success (Wongsothorn et al., 2018). However, many express **negative attitudes toward traditional teaching methods**, which often rely on grammar-translation and rote memorization rather than communicative practice (Noom-ura, 2013). These negative perceptions can lower enthusiasm, reduce participation, and foster language anxiety, especially in speaking.

4. The Role of Anxiety and Confidence

Affective factors such as **foreign language anxiety**, fear of making mistakes, and lack of self-confidence frequently emerge as barriers to motivation and positive attitudes (Trang et al., 2013). Many Thai students hesitate to use English actively in class or outside school, which limits opportunities for practice and authentic communication. Conversely, when teachers create supportive, low-anxiety environments, students display more positive attitudes, greater willingness to communicate, and stronger motivation.

5. Influence of External Factors

External influences such as parental expectations, societal demands, and national education policies also shape motivation. Many students experience **"ought-to motivation"**, driven by pressure from family, teachers, or curriculum requirements (Dörnyei, 2009). While this can encourage persistence, it sometimes results in surface-level learning focused on exams rather than meaningful communication. On the other hand, exposure to international media, technology, and opportunities to use English in authentic contexts can enhance integrative attitudes and intrinsic interest.

6. Knowledge for Educational Practice

From these findings, several key implications for education emerge:

- Teachers should balance **instrumental** and **integrative** motivations by connecting English learning to both practical goals and cultural/identity development.
- Classroom practices should shift from rote learning to **communicative, student-centered activities** that reduce anxiety and build confidence.
- Schools and policymakers should provide more opportunities for authentic use of English, such as **language camps, exchange programs, multimedia exposure, and project-based learning**.
- Teachers should nurture students' **ideal L2 self** by helping them visualize themselves as competent English users in future academic, professional, and social contexts.

Conclusion

The accumulated knowledge shows that Thai students' motivation and attitudes toward English are complex and shaped by a combination of internal and external factors. Instrumental goals dominate, but integrative elements and self-concept play critical roles in long-term success. Positive attitudes toward English are widespread, yet challenges such as anxiety, negative classroom experiences, and limited authentic exposure hinder progress. Therefore, fostering both motivation and favorable attitudes through supportive teaching methods and enriched learning environments is essential for enhancing English proficiency among Thai learners.

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